



## **Caroline County Public Schools**

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### **HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON EDUCATION REFORM**

#### **Improving Results for Children with Disabilities**

**Testimony Presented by:  
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Mr. Chairman. Committee Members.

My name is Larry Lorton. I come before you today in two capacities: (1) as a superintendent of schools with a long history of involvement with children with disabilities in the school setting, and (2) at the invitation of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). This appearance before you caps over two years of active efforts in support of increased, preferably full, funding for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Most of those efforts targeted my representative, Maryland's 1st District Congressman, Wayne Gilchrest, and senators, Paul Sarbanes and Barbara Mikulski.

It is my hope to achieve one goal: to help convince this committee of the rightness to fulfill Congress' 27 year old as yet unmet promise to fully fund IDEA. I will try to put a face on IDEA funding; to take you into the soul of one of America's 14,500 school districts so you can see for yourself how one school system takes its role of accountability seriously by delivering children and their parents the kinds of services that get results. You will see that Caroline County, representative of hundreds of other school districts across this great land, not only achieves much with little but with adequate resources could do even more to enrich the lives of needy children and ensure even more bright futures.

I will not dwell on the Congressional funding shortfall except to demonstrate its negative impact. You know the numbers better than I. You know the cumulative funding deficit. You know what it will take to make school districts whole. I will only confirm that I unequivocally support the full funding of IDEA and try to show you why.

## **CAROLINE COUNTY: A BRIEF PROFILE**

Unlike most states Maryland school systems are organized around counties. There are 23 counties in Maryland and with the City of Baltimore total 24 school districts. They range in size from Montgomery County with a population about 900,000 and 135,000 students to Kent County with 19,000 residents and 2,800 students. Caroline, like Kent, resides on the so-called Eastern Shore along with seven other counties. Caroline has about 30,000 people and 5,400 students. Additionally, unlike many states, Maryland school boards are fiscally dependent on state and county government for operating and capital revenues. Boards of education in Maryland have no taxing authority nor can local boards use ballot referenda for either operating funds or levies for facilities improvements.

Caroline County is among the poorest subdivisions in the State of Maryland. It ranks 23rd in its taxable wealth per student, the single best measure of the ability of local government to raise revenue. Caroline is dead last in spending per pupil and dead last in the percentage of the local government's revenue appropriated for public education. Caroline is the only subdivision in the state where its primary industry is agriculture. The adult illiteracy rate is estimated to be close to a third of its population, around 30%, and the percentage of children in school on free and reduced lunches is just shy of 42%. Caroline has the 4th highest percentage of Hispanic students in the state. Its median family income is 32%, a full third, below the state average. Its unemployment rate is over 25% higher than the state average and the 8th highest poverty rate at 11.9%. It is, in essence, a county of the working poor.

## **THE CAROLINE COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS: OVERCOMING OBSTACLES**

In the midst of these un-promising statistics is a school system that performs beyond its predictions. At the core of this swirl of socio-economic negatives is a school system that defies its fortune. In a state recognized nationally for its tough educational accountability program, Caroline consistently out-performed most other counties. Over the 8 years of the administration of the Maryland School Performance Program (MSPP) Caroline had the third highest overall gain. In the last administration in 2002 only two counties exceeded Caroline's overall reading performance ranking 5th best in 3rd grade and 6th best in 5th grade. In a state where my own statistical analyses shows that nearly 80% of the variance in reading performance on MSPP is attributable to the burden of poverty children carry on their backs through the school house door and the expenditure per pupil, Caroline County far exceeds predicted performance expectations. Arguably, no school system does more with less than the Caroline County Public Schools.

Key to this discussion is the reminder that all children with few exceptions, including children with special needs--special education children--take part in the state assessment.

Additionally, Caroline County is in its 26th year of full time, all day kindergarten for every child. Resting on what research and studies have repeatedly shown over the last 40 years, Caroline's commitment to children entering school ready to learn has taken place without full state funding support.

In the last three years Caroline has systematically reduced its class size in grades one and two to an average of about 18. Also, Caroline is in its second year of restructuring, interventions and support for children in grades K-12. Some of the key features are integrating the applications of technology, replacement of noncertificated instructional assistants with highly trained professionals, doubling the middle school time devoted to reading and mathematics, and the development of a series of uniform and district-wide end of course examinations in core high school content areas. These and many other local initiatives are made possible because of Caroline's ability to compete for and acquire grants. As of this day Caroline totals 128 such grants totaling \$17,907,175. This figure exceeds by over 70% local county government's appropriation to our general operating fund.

School Boards and superintendents, past and present, generated and sustained a belief in and a vision of commitment to children and the classroom. Over 80% of the general operating budget is allocated to schools. Within the remaining 20% are utilities, administration, and other necessary and ancillary costs.

### **CAROLINE'S FISCAL FUTURE**

Maryland is among those states for which questions of fiscal equity among school districts has been a key concern for well over 20 years and nine attempts to address it at the state level. Today, if Caroline were to spend what Montgomery County spends per student it would mean an additional \$15.2mm to our mission. If we spent what Howard County spends it would add \$9.5mm to our coffers. At the same rate of spending as a neighboring school district Caroline would have \$12.4mm additional dollars. If Caroline merely matched the state average it would mean an additional \$7.0mm. School funding is not equitable.

Potential good news does rest on the horizon. The 2002 Maryland legislature approved a dramatically revised overhaul of school funding following two years of the most comprehensive and detailed study of its kind. The Commission on Education Finance, Equity and Excellence attempted what no other such effort has been able to do; first, define what constitutes an adequate education for all children, and second, develop a funding plan and appropriation formula to provide an adequate education for every child. The resulting legislative plan provided a two year "bridge "of funding increases moving from the old state formula and funding levels to the new four year phase in of the adopted Commission recommendations (FY 05 - FY 08). If funded, Caroline will receive the largest increase per pupil in the state at the end of FY 08. However, a host of national and state economic events suggests not only puts the funding of the revised formula in jeopardy but threatens FY 04 Bridge funding as well.

### **CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: A CAROLINE COUNT PROFILE**

Seven hundred fourteen (714) of Caroline's nearly 5,400 students (13.24%) have educationally handicapping conditions. This is nearly one in seven children. For reporting purposes diagnoses of children leading to the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP) places every IEP holding child in one of 14 disability codes. Nearly all children are diagnosed in only six of the 13:

Disability Code	Number	Per Cent*
Mental Retardation (01)	62	9%
Speech/Language Disorders (04)	226	32%
Emotionally Disturbed (06)	27	4%
Specific Learning Disabilities (09)	334	47%
Multiple Disabilities (10)	24	4%
Autism (14)	18	2%

\*Percentages have been rounded to the units place.

Trends reveal that the category of Specific Learning Disability is growing the fastest by far with Emotionally Disturbed, Multiple Disabilities and Autism next.

Overall, most diagnoses are made by age ten in a pattern of more diagnoses with each succeeding age starting at three. Generally, a severe drop-off occurs at age 14. Interestingly, 92% of Developmental Delays are diagnosed by age five. Males with IEPs outnumber females almost 2:1. African American children constitute 19% of diagnosed children (190), Hispanics 1%, and Caucasians 77%. Caroline's African American student population is also 19%.

## **CAROLINE SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES**

Almost from the outset Maryland's service delivery model differed from that of many states. Rather than grouping children by disability Maryland featured a "level of services" model. Basically, a level of service more or less corresponds to the number of hours a child needs special education per day. Levels 1-4 generally are delivered right in the child's home school. Level five is a special facility or school site in the child's home district. Level six is a residential placement.

A key and maybe subtle implication of this model is its inherent focus on inclusion. A child is looked upon as included, the least restrictive environment, with special services as needed rather than the other way around where self-contained is the norm with inclusion as warranted.

In addition to the complement of specially trained and certificated special education leading staff, Caroline also has special education aides working with teachers and children.

Being a relatively small, rural school district Caroline initiated two other highly effective but efficient service delivery modes. The first was the development of a special education consortium with four other county school districts. Audiology and teachers for the hearing and visually impaired and occupational and physical therapists serve all five districts. Operating on a \$1.1mm budget shared by the districts the consortium delivers much needed services to all children that would be either impossible to find or inordinately expensive otherwise.

A second initiative organized Sunday night delivery and Friday night pick up of blind and deaf children from seven counties placed in residential facilities. Again, the transportation consortium is both effective and efficient.

## **UNDERFUNDED IDEA AND EDUCATIONAL SERVICES**

With this briefest of sketches four conclusions can be safely drawn:

- (1) Caroline County delivers an impressive level of services to children with special needs,
- (2) state accountability performance data indicate that Caroline delivers high quality, effective services to all children,
- (3) it does so despite the conditions that would justifiably predict otherwise, and
- (4) it does so despite even with severely limited resources.

Attachment "A" shows 13 years of federal and state revenue support for special education compared to the school district's special education budget. The crucial, obvious, most damaging points to grasp from this graph are: (1) how far short federal funding through IDEA comes to underwriting its fair and obligatory share of services for children with special needs, and (2) how many local dollars as shown by the difference on the black bars between the special education budget and total of federal and state support are needed to provide special education services. Services must be provided. They are not optional. Local school districts must make up the difference!

Attachment "B" is a spread sheet showing Caroline's FY 02 budget disaggregated by budget category. This data is presented to show that Caroline's plea for full funding of IDEA is justified by real numbers. While applying some indirect costs would be justified, we chose not to. You deserve a conservative, realistic picture. Remember, in Maryland in general and in Caroline County in particular, special education children with few exceptions spend some portion of their school day in regular classes along side non-handicapped peers with regular teachers. Each hour, each day, for every such child student/staff ratios increase, textbooks and other instructional materials are used, and a regular classroom teacher not in the special education budget is delivering instruction.

Some would have you believe that local school district claims of the impact of "unfunded mandates" such as IDEA (and NCLB) are overstated. In the Caroline County Public Schools and with IDEA, even a conservative fiscal analysis proves otherwise.

## **CONCLUSION**

In no way does the appeal for fully funding IDEA dismiss responsibilities or accountability elsewhere. Nor do such appeals suggest a fully funded IDEA is the final answer--the missing piece of the fiscal puzzle. Fully funding IDEA at the very least merely creates an opportunity for local school systems to do a better job.

Fully funding IDEA possesses not only a moral and ethical dimension in the context of a promise and commitment not kept. Fully funding IDEA has a very practical, classroom focused, child-centered dimension. Every dollar lost from inadequate IDEA support is a dollar lost for enhanced or improved special education services and/or enhanced and improved services for other children. Contrary to what some critics charge money does make a difference in the educational lives of children. It certainly would make a difference in the Caroline County Public Schools.